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LITHOGRAPHY

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BY

BOLTON BROWN

NEW YORK
FITZROY CARRINGTON
1923

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D. B. Updike, The Merrymount Press, Boston

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LITHOGRAPHY

BOTH engraving and drawing give us pictures, but the differences in the two methods of production cause them to be of quite diverse kinds. The difference in method of production is that which separates engraving, a procedure dictated by the intention to print, from drawing, where the only dictation is the intention to produce a work of art. This is why etching, as compared to engraving, appeals more to artists: it makes a closer approach to natural drawing. I say approach because even etching, far as it is from the rigidities of engraving, stops a long way short of any drawing that can be called natural.

I call a natural drawing one in which the eye's immediate perceptions guide, instant by instant, the growing work. It is not so in etching: white means black, everything is reversed, and hope does as well as it can what vision would do better. Even the line the etcher does draw is not the line of the print, but merely its glittering locus, to be widened afterward, as well as may be and with varying success, with acid.

Among the prints, the only ones not wholly or partly of the nature of engravings are lithographs. These are not things limited and dictated by the necessities of a printing process: they are things growing freely out of a drawing process, and the print is only a piece of subsequent good luck. Eye and mind have not been forced to unnatural dissociation, but function as they were meant to do. These considerations explain the profound difference in character between lithographs and other prints. Considered physically, lithographs are prints; esthetically, they are drawings.

Prints from drawings, one may object, are common enough in magazines and elsewhere. Our public has been miseducated so to think of them, but really just what most of these are not is autographic drawings. Elaborate mechanisms have so reduced the scale, in most cases, that they seem no longer human work, but that of Lilliputians. Textures have been changed and values shifted. Far indeed is the final result from what the artist drew. Lithography, however, is saddled with nothing of all this. The drawing itself practically prints itself, scale, texture, tone, everything, just as the artist made it.

To my taste, the classics of lithography are works in which obviously the design has had little or no previous existence, but was built up out of, and controlled by, the way the crayon naturally marks the stone. There are landscapes by Ciceri and others, and figures by Daumier and Gavarni that illustrate what I mean. To the Japanese embroiderer nature is an affair of silk stitches: to the consummate crayonist she becomes an affair of crayon markings. It is because these markings are so beautiful in themselves, so versatile, so able to follow so many sides of nature, so many sides of our response to her, that I hold it a noble method.

Senefelder was the man who invented lithography, that is to say, printing from an unengraved surface. Its name derives from the stone, but in our day commercial needs have introduced so many other substances—zinc, aluminum, rubber, almost anything, one might say—that in the technical journals the word "planography" has appeared in its stead. Planography is printing by Senefelder's process, regardless of the substance utilized. Lithography is that subdivision of planography which prints from stone.

Lithographic prints divide into classes according to the method of drawing, whether washed, scraped, done with pen, done on paper and transferred, or made with crayon on the stone itself. It is this last that is of chief interest to us, for, allowing it to include as subsidiary adjuncts occasional stumping, scraping, and accents with pen or brush, it is the art in which all the great early masters worked, and the only one in which it was possible to achieve the results which they did achieve. It is still the only one in which it is possible to produce results which are comparable therewith. Excepting the class referred to as printed from transfers, of which I speak later, the others mentioned, with all their numerous variations and interbreedings, constitute hardly more than a field for adventures and experiments. All sorts of things, one sees, might be pulled off in curious ways; but since, after all, only drawing is what we are after, we come back finally to the idea that nothing can be better than the best possible drawing materials, conceived as such —materials for translating visual intentions into terms of hand movement. Crayon on stone—*crayonstone*, for short—gives just this. Nothing does it better: other methods are outclassed. History, as seen in the acts of artists, publishers, and the generality of men, agrees with this claim.

Reverting a moment to the gifted inventor of lithography, Senefelder: there are persons who refer to him in such a way as to imply that because he invented a printing method he should be accepted as an authority on art, at least on the art employing his method. This is erroneous entirely. Senefelder was a craftsman, and one to whom we owe very much indeed, a debt understood by few better than by the writer. But as an art critic he must be disregarded.

The man who draws on the stone is a lithographic draughtsman, not a lithographer. A lithograph is a print, and the printer, the man who makes the print, is a lithographer. If the artist prints his own drawing, as I and others do, and still others well might, he is then both a draughtsman and a lithographer. To speak of one who merely draws on the stone, not to mention one who only draws on paper, as a lithographer is to spread confusion of speech. And with confused speaking the art world of lithography to-day is rotten.

Is there any other evidence aside from that of history, which would lead us to expect of crayonstone drawing a quality of achievement superior to drawings in general? Yes, there is: there is evidence which, even if history were not and lithography had been born this morning, would enable us to predict its success.

Among drawing materials some are inherently better than others, despite the contention that it is only the man behind the gun that counts. Paderewski's music is more worth while when it is from a piano than when it is from a jews' harp. So in drawing: results can be got with one material that cannot be got, by anybody, with another. Art rests on certain visual fundamentals. The greatest range and the greatest control, between them, open the greatest possibilities. Crayonstone has a range from paper to ink, and its control of the intervals into which this may be divided is limited only by the limits of the artist's senses.

What we can present of texture, line, and value depends on what we have to create them with. My idea of the texture of the moth's wing cannot be given with charcoal on a brick, nor can a blackboard drawing two inches high do much with the lines of a nude figure. A thunderstorm in silverpoint is bound to lack something in sombreness. But on stone you can do any and all of these things, and many another beside. The moth, the figure, storm clouds or filmy veils,—nothing is denied you.

Engraving on metal, I may be reminded, also can do many things, and I agree that, as mere vision, it can. But art is not merely visual:

partly it is, as Ruskin declared, athletics. That is, it is manual: and on this side, when we think of the relative possibilities of ploughing metal and controlling crayon—words are superfluous. As stated before, no engraving yields drawing at all: the autographic quality,—sensitiveness, freedom,—exactly the special gift of lithography, is absent. The fact that drawing is usually practiced on paper shows merely that paper is convenient, not that nothing better exists.

Drawing asks for a flat surface, and the stone is flat, incredibly, beyond what any piece of paper ever dreamed of. The surface drawn on must be firm, and the stone is firm, rock firm, with a quality unknown to paper. The surface must be abrasive, in a way exactly suited to the substance marking it: and the crystalline stone is the very ideal of abrasiveness as the chalk is of the thing to be abrased by it. Every faintest or fiercest pressure or swerve of the hand is ineradicably recorded and goes down the ages in the print.

In attempting to describe the working qualities of the crayon I find I cannot do it as completely as I would like, because they relate to muscular and tactual feelings not producible in words. At all events, crayons vary, all of them,—and there are many kinds,—in hardness, in stickiness, and in brittleness. From hard as horn to soft as butter, from smooth as soap to sticky as tar, from a consistency like asphaltum to a consistency like a soda cracker —they range. They also differ in responsiveness to temperature, in their chemical effect on the stone, and in their reaction to the gum and acid. What one will not do, another will. From silverpoint to mezzotint—that is what you can get out of them.

As a physical article, crayon is built up from various waxes, resins, soaps, etc. Crayons sold on the market, especially the harder and medium grades, are good so far as they go, but unlimited delightful others that greatly widen the range of the art can be made by any one. I have made them for years.

Coming now to the printing: we print from the same surface that I have been referring to as a drawing surface. Its texture, viewed through an actual or imaginary microscope, is an array of points of stone,—small indeed, but amazingly real and reliable when you deal with them. As the crayon passes over the stone, each point scrapes a little of it off. The crayon has just enough adhesiveness so that it sticks. The ultimate elements of the design are thus these thousands of isolated black points. Under the microscope they look like sprinklings of black gunpowder. As greater and greater pressure is used on the crayon, these ultimate granules become both more numerous and larger; they may at last even coalesce into one solid black. But enough pressure for this is usually reserved for extreme accents: the natural lithograph is composed, for the most part, of strokes and tones which are grays, some lighter, some darker.

Now in printing a crayon drawing, the existence of these ultimate grains, closer or farther, coarse as cinders or fine as smoke, is the final fact we get down to. When the artist was making his drawing he was making something else also. He did not see it, but he was making a chemical spot underneath every bit of crayon he applied to the stone. The black color of his drawing, guiding his eye, was but some lampblack introduced just for that; it has no relation to the chemical spot. Other substances, not related to its visual functions, are put into the crayon to produce this. It is not the crayon itself, but this spot it makes, that the printer considers. Indeed, when this spot has been formed the crayon itself has become superfluous—we wash it off entirely, dealing with the stone now simply as a printing plate.

The peculiarity of the printing spot is that it accepts grease and refuses water. It is also a fact that a wet stone refuses grease. This being the case, we pass a wet sponge over all, followed by a roller bearing greasy ink. The ink is not taken by the wet stone, but is by the printing spot. The design resumes its visibility, but what makes it visible now is printer's ink instead of, as at first, the crayon. Being ink, by pressing on paper we get our lithograph.

Such is the simplified theory: in practice modifications come in. The chief of these is the so-called "etching." This has no parallelism to the etching we do on copper. It does, however, consist of an acid bath which, to an extremely slight degree, dissolves the surface of the stone. Its purpose is the opposite to that of the crayon. Where the crayon goes prints black: where the etch goes prints white. The etch is a watery solution of gum arabic plus a little nitric acid. The really effective agent is the gum, the acid merely enabling this to take hold of the stone better. This acidulated gum is dried on: then it is washed off again: but an invisible coat remains. Its presence is what enables us to pull an edition without soiling the stone or enlarging the printing spots.

The stronger the acid, the more thorough is this protection; but also, the more likely it is to eat into and injure the drawing. The Scylla and Charybdis of the printer are the twin dangers of under-etching and over-etching. Under-etching yields fine proofs, for a short run; over-etching yields from the first proofs that have been injured, but keeps it up a long time. This explains the existence of so many bad, sandy lithographs from the old days: the publishers demanded of the printers a greater number than the stone would yield without being over-etched.

Any etch that removes even the faintest dust in the most delicate passages, also reduces, to some slight extent, the beauty of the stronger parts. For whether a stroke is stronger or paler, it is a complete, unique, created unit as it leaves the artist's hand, a constellation of black stars, every one in its place, the smaller giving bloom, the larger vigor. Any etch that affects the delicate parts of delicate tones is affecting at the same time, if less markedly, the delicate particles that exist throughout the strong tones.

Continuing now to the actual pulling of the proof: there is something to be said about dark impressions and light impressions from the same stone. From the very beginning of the practice of the craft—you will find it in books—there has been misunderstanding on this point. The assumption has been that when you pull a lighter and darker impression you have got the same thing, only in different keys of light. This is not true. There is no such thing as shifting the light key without some shifting of other things, without changing in some degree the tonal and textural relations that affect fundamentals. Why and how this is, I will explain.

For every stone there is such a thing as a normal print. This is the print that gives on the paper the image of each granule on the stone, truly duplicated as to size. To get a print that is darker than such a one, we must put more ink on the stone and this ink must go somewhere, and somewhere where it was not before. Where it goes is around the edges of each printing spot, the consequent enlargement of which darkens the impression pulled. But—and here is the kernel of the matter—this overhang of ink in excess of what the stone calls for does not distribute itself around the edge of each spot in proportion to the size of that spot; if it could do this, the tones of the drawing would maintain their original relations: it distributes itself in a band which is the same width for all sizes of spots, with the result that a band that enlarges one spot by one-tenth of itself, enlarges a spot of one-tenth this size by relatively ten times as much. Of course, I have not measured them, but the effects I see agree with this idea.

Two results necessarily follow: the small spots being enlarged relatively more than the large ones, tones composed of small spots, wholly or in part, are darkened relatively more than tones composed of larger ones: the textures composed of smaller spots are coarsened more than others are. In a word, if we go on pulling darker and darker prints, we constantly remove the light tones farther from white paper while the blacks, being black, remain stationary. This shortening of the light-range crowds delicate intervals out of existence, and weakens strong ones. Lights, unless pure white—and these stare—no longer count, and dark accents no longer have snap. The condition referred to by Senefelder as "monotonic" is brought about. Followed to its full possibilities, what was an ordered set of varied tones and textures becomes a mass of clotted silhouettes.

Matters fall out very similarly if we shift the normal printing key to a lighter one. To get a light print we must, by under-inking or under-pressure, get simply an imperfect and rotten impression carrying falsities of texture and value all over it, or else we must lighten the stone by acid, an act which, just as over-inking did, affects large and small granules unequally. Thus tones are again upset, textures coarsened, and the visual balances created by the artist destroyed.

What I have said so far has been with reference to crayonstone drawing and its printing; but it is possible, as noted at the outset, to print planographically drawings not made on the surface but transferred there from paper. It is the existence and practice of this method that makes the name *crayonstone* necessary. This name distinguishes prints of drawings made on stone from prints of drawings made elsewhere and transferred. In transferred work, Senefelder's process has merely been used in the same capacity as would be any other reproducing process. The print produced, not being a crayonstone, does not look like one, but like its original, a drawing on paper. The better the print is, the more it looks like a drawing on paper. That is to say, the more perfect the transferring, the less the drawing is affected. Prints made so, being lithographically printed, are lithographs. But they are not the art of Isabey, Daumier, Gavarni, and the rest: that is, they are not crayonstones. In the sense in which the word lithograph is used in relation to the men named, transfers are not "lithographs" at all. The differences which divide transfers from crayonstones are not questions of dates or persons or ideals or subjects or habits. They are more fundamental even than these. They are differences in textures, lines, and tones produced, and *necessarily* produced, by the difference between stone and paper. This difference is controlling and definitive, impossible to be eluded by any one whatever. And it is markedly in favor of stone work. Artists who substitute paper do so as a physical convenience. But with this convenience they are forced to accept great limitations, limitations not present in crayonstone.

The difference in surface between stone and paper is one of hardness and of fineness. The stone is simply adamant. As to fineness, the point to be noted is that stone can be ground as coarse as paper can be made, but paper cannot be made as fine as stone can be ground. Consequently, what we have is some coarse textures in which drawings, whether on stone or paper, may resemble, though not duplicate, one another, and then a sliding scale of increasingly finer textures on which drawings resemble one another less and less, those on stone gradually passing over into a world where paper drawing cannot follow them at all. And this is the world in which most lithographs have been made.

Accordingly, if you try to duplicate on paper a Calame landscape, you cannot. Nobody can, because the physical situation makes it impossible. My statement would be just as true of most of the work of any of the master lithographers—Isabey, Daumier, Mouilleron, Gavarni, Ciceri, or whom you will. Moreover, even if you could reproduce on paper the tones and textures of any fine lithograph, you could not get a transfer print to give them back to you. Transferring is not a sufficiently perfect device. It succeeds only with drawings of a certain class, and that a restricted one.

Whistler pushed transfer about to its limits, but the best he could get, served by a thoroughly good printer—he could not print himself—was only something a little worse than he would have produced on paper with lead pencil. A little worse because, for his aims, lithographic crayon on paper is not so good as pencil on paper. Then, as already stated, the transfer did not give him quite fully even what crayon on paper gave him. He understood, himself, how it was. "Restricted indeed I have found it" are his published words.

Apologies are due the reader for reiteration of the obvious, but so long as the obvious is ignored or denied, some of us will wearily go on pointing it out. The persons to whom it is most worth while to point it out are those laymen with taste and without prejudices, and those artists who, if they were correctly informed of the facts in lithography, might use it themselves.

Space limitations forbid me any general discussion of the historical conception of lithography, or the biographical one, or the commercial or the archaeological one, as distinguished from the technical and esthetic conception which constitutes my more especial field. I not unwittingly leave other aspects to other pens. What I see as the history of lithography, in a bird's-eye view, is that, about the year 1800, men were suddenly handed a new and very superior outfit of drawing materials, and that, owing to the fact that drawings made with them could be printed in quantities, said men began to make and deal out to the public large numbers of what were esthetically autographic drawings.

Such a situation had never before existed. Such drawings had never been public or popular: there was no way they could be. Not only, moreover, was it the case that previously the public had not had autographic drawings, but till then no drawings of so high a quality had existed. Without the materials, they were technically impossible: without the power of printing and selling, they were economically impossible.

So there rapidly grew up a considerable body of able workers on stone whom the publishers, for half a century, employed upon a variety of enterprises, some less and some more important. Practiced so, constituting a distinct profession, developing a thorough understanding of the materials and a perception of those subjective qualities of temperament and of those objective qualities of nature for which the method was peculiarly fitted, the art in a decade or two blossomed into achievements which have never been surpassed and which few of our contemporaries would dream of attempting.

Then came the invention of photography and the production of blocks that could be printed along with type—and lithography was largely superseded. It went lower and lower;

it went down until it was out—almost. The masters died. Their equals have not arisen.

To-day the situation is radically different. That very occasional artist who practices crayonstone lithography does so as a private adventure and a personal expression. Out of this, excellent things may come: a few have come. But the confusion of the public mind as to what a lithograph is, whether it is "commercial" or not, whether it is "original" or not, whether it is a "limited edition" or not, whether "the plate has been destroyed" or not,—these and a swarm of similar hindrances stand between the public of to-day and an intelligent appreciation of lithography. Ideas dragged over from the world of etchings, ideas about signatures, and remarks, and states—most of which mean nothing at all in lithography—also clog the situation.

And among the artists themselves, the habits of touch and thought and sight developed by using materials having quite different qualities tend to persist and work over into the lithograph, and to make it a thing that is as near as may be to a charcoal drawing, a pencil drawing, or whatever may previously have been its familiar predecessor. This is inevitable, and there is a good side to it. Nevertheless, no man does himself or his material justice until much practice has made it very familiar to him. The absence of this intimate experience is what puts such a profound gulf between the achievements of the golden half century and those since it ended. The early men were professionals and knew their business. Now, everybody is an amateur and nobody knows his job.

When I dig through portfolios of old lithographs I find that the greater part are worthless of course. They were badly drawn and almost, but never quite, as badly printed. Some are over-etched, some over-printed, and the great majority are both. An occasional better one crops up, for men who could draw have existed in all periods and used all materials. There have been chaps who could print, too: I know their work when I see it, and I take off my hat to it. But the prize is that rare case in which a gifted enthusiast has hit upon an inspiring subject and a master printer has handled the result. Such a print is a treasure time cannot stale nor age impair,—a thing for the collector and the museum—provided there ever was a museum which understood that the preservation of beauty, not history, was its function.

The paper on which prints are made, if fine

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impressions are got, must be exactly suitable. The finest of the old prints are on India insets upon an unsized plate paper—a paper and a method that cannot be bettered to-day. It used to be—old men, insiders, have told me—it used to be the custom for publishers to print, of some important work they had in hand, impressions to the number of a hundred. The best of printers and finest of papers were employed: the prints were flawless and took the name of "artist's proofs." Then a second hundred, with but a suspicion of inferiority, was pulled. These two groups were sold to the élite generally by advanced subscription, at a high price. They were worth it. Then perhaps eight hundred more would be taken and the stones gummed down and preserved. After a while, when the first issue had been worked off, without making too much noise about the fact that it was a second issue, the stones were resurrected, and a second thousand, all inferior, were run off and sold for what they would fetch.

Aside from such methods of publication, there have come down to us many individual lithographs of which only a brief half dozen real proofs, that showed what the artist really drew, were ever taken. The stone, once proved in this way, was rushed to the man who pulled off hundreds—for a waiting printer's devil, a cog in the machine of a magazine or newspaper, in which the lithograph was a mere incident, and the quality of which, as a print, simply had to take the chances of "quantity production."

A difference between early lithography and contemporary work is that whereas formerly the art was an adjunct to the publishing business, handled as a business proposition by business men, now it is an adjunct to the artist's profession, handled by artists as art. The huge edition is unknown, fifty, or even thirty, being a usual number. As an expert printer I wish strongly to testify to the lay public that the difference between asking a stone for a thousand—or even, as Senefelder says, "several thousand"—impressions and asking it for one-twentieth of that is, to the stone and the proofs it yields, enormous. More even than merely the quality of the prints is involved. The drawing itself is affected. For there are sorts of drawings, and certain beautiful qualities of drawing, that will yield thirty or fifty pulls, but that never could and never did yield a thousand. In other words, lithography handled by artists can yield better things than the publishers got out of it. This is the truth—

the art is capable of more than people have any idea of, even people who have a very good idea of its historic achievements.

When I discourse of lithography, it is understood that it is truly lithography, by which I mean perfect lithography, that I refer to. For it seems to me a thing is a thing only when it is perfect: when it is imperfect it is something else. Reasons why the vast mass of lithographs are not in this class have been suggested. Some that when pulled were fine have simply been worn out since, like old clothes. Some that were superb as drawings on the stone were etched into wrecks before even the printing started. Some have been harmed by mishandlings of the printer's roller. Some are on impossible paper. Some have been plainly just worked to death—and long after.

But those that have escaped show a drawing not known elsewhere. In range, force, and delicacy, they hold against all competition. In autographic identity with the artist's own work, a good print leaves nothing to be desired. In the hands of a skilled printer and for a limited edition, the original and the print are the same thing. In thus combining supreme drawing with supreme printing of it, crayonstone lithography is unique in the whole world of art.

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